PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 12 Number 12 November 2015

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 15th November 2015: Ananthagiri Hills & Kotepally Tank. Meeting point: Punjagutta (opp. Mangatrai Pearls), 6.00AM.

Besides being a pleasant woodland walk, Ananthagiri has always been very productive from the birding viewpoint, and is a paradise for forest birds. One can see Flycatchers, White-eyes, Chloropsis, Orange-headed Thrush, Nightjars, among others. The Indian Pitta and the Brown Fish Owl have been reported earlier. This will be a half-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

INDOOR MEETING: "Deluge": 2nd part of BBC's "Wonders of the Monsoon" documentary series.
Monday, 2nd November 2015, 6.30PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Step into a world where life is shaped by the greatest weather system on earth!
Monsoon winds sweep across a vast region every year, turning drought to deluge and shaping the landscapes, the wildlife and the cultures. All life here, from the highest peaks of the Himalayas to the scorched red earth of Australia, is dominated by this rampaging weather system.

THE SEARCH…IN THE GRASSLANDS OF ROLLAPADU

Trip Report – Rollapadu WLS, 18th-19th September 2015

Anita Negi

Photo: Humayun Taher

It was a Friday evening (18th Sep'15), when we (Humayun, Lawrence Uncle, Sudhir, Bindu, Gowthama & I) started off to our weekend birding destination, Rollapadu, in the hopes of spotting the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican.

We met at Humayun's house around 4:00PM on Friday evening and took off to our destination with two cars accommodating us all. The plan was to reach Kurnool around 8:00PM and rest there for the night before starting off to Rollapadu early next morning to watch the Lesser Florican in display.

As per the plan, we managed to reach Kurnool around 8:00PM and zeroed in on 'Haritha' for our night halt. After checking into the Tourism Dept rest house at Kurnool, we took out some time for dinner, and the rest of the time was spent in excitedly discussing the possible sightings of the next day. The loud discussion in the hotel room was suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door - and we had Amritha, Gokul and Sathvik, who had started a little late, join us. After spending some time together discussing various topics, we decided to call it a day with the promise to meet near the car parking by 5:00AM sharp the next morning.

With three girls put up in the same room, it was definitely going to be a challenge to make it on time the next morning! However, after all the hustle bustle, we came running down to the car park at around 5:10AM. Needless to say the others - men ;-) - were impatiently waiting for us, as we had to reach Rollapadu by sunrise. Starting off without further delay, we reached Rollapadu around 6:00AM after having tea on the way to refresh ourselves.

About Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary:

Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, *covering an area of 6.14 km^2 in the Kurnool district, is known primarily as a habitat of the Great Indian Bustard. It was established in 1988 to protect the Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican, and remains the only habitat in Andhra Pradesh for the Bustard, which is a critically endangered species. Rollapadu is primarily a grassland ecosystem with mixed forests and thorny bushes. Cotton, tobacco and sunflower are cultivated in the agricultural lands that border the sanctuary. It also houses 132 bird species with the Alganur reservoir near the sanctuary frequented annually by migratory species.*

Southern Grey Shrike
(Photo: Humayun Taher)

Bang On…… We were at Rollapadu at 6:00AM in spite of our late start - the girls prevailed!

Common Hawk Cuckoo
(Photo: Lawrence Mathappan)

On the way to Rollapadu from Kurnool, we sighted the Indian Roller, Common Hawk Cuckoo, Southern Grey Shrike, House Crow, Common Myna, Indian Robin, Pied Bushchat, Drongos & Kingfishers, to name a few.

We were a convoy of three cars now, with Amritha, Sathvik & Gokul joining us. We moved at a slow pace as we neared the Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, since we didn't want to miss out on the farmlands around the sanctuary which also offered the potential of sighting the Great Indian Bustard & the Lesser Florican.

Yellow-billed Babbler (Photo: Lawrence Mathappan)

As we entered the Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary, we were welcomed by the pleasant chirping of various birds. On looking around, we were happy to get sightings of Golden Orioles, Rose-ringed Parakeets, Black Drongo, Yellow-billed Babblers, Common Mynas, Laughing Doves & Eurasian Collared Doves, all bunched up in one tree as if they were happily enjoying their morning meal on one table, leaving the photographers in the group with enough time to capture the moment.

Laughing Dove (Photo: Anita Negi)

As we were about to move on from the entrance to the grasslands, there was a fluttering sound in the same tree, persuading us to spend some more time there. Scanning the tree thoroughly, we found a couple of Spotted Owlets scrutinizing us from the thick cover before flying off to a nearby tree.

Red-rumped Swallow (Photo: Lawrence Mathappan)

On walking a little ahead, we saw a few Red-rumped Swallows bathing religiously in a small pool of water on the ground very close by. I pulled out my camera instantly, not wanting to miss the moment, telling myself "it is not a big deal to get a good shot of these birds. If I get it this close, I too can be a good photographer!" - but all in vain! - as usual I couldn't get a single good shot. Kudos to all the photographers, it is indeed a very challenging endeavour.

The sun had started to show up, and we realized that if we didn't get into the sanctuary right away, we might miss the display of the Lesser Florican as it displays mainly in the mornings & evenings only. We got into the cars again, this time to take a ride on the muddy roads of the sanctuary. Packed in one car Sudhir, Gowtham & I were praying to God that we would get to see the Lesser Florican this time, as we had never seen it in spite of having visited the sanctuary several times before.

After driving just a few metres into the sanctuary, we heard Lawrence Uncle shout from the other car "Florican!" We literally jumped out, leaving our cars in the middle of the road. Lawrence Uncle pointed to a patch of grassland towards the left in excitement, but the Florican was nowhere to be seen. But he was very sure that he had seen the Florican jump out of the tall grass.

We decided to halt there and wait. We all stood there with our cameras facing the spot, and then suddenly it jumped out again, and our happiness knew no bounds.

Humayun and Lawrence Uncle asked us to relax and quietly sit at a spot without making noise, as the Lesser Florican was displaying, and would jump up again. After waiting quietly for some time, there was a sudden outburst of the clicking of cameras as the Florican gave a glorious display, jumping in and out of the grass.

Lesser Florican (Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

We were extremely lucky to have spotted it immediately after entering the sanctuary. The best part was we didn't just spot the Florican, but also saw it displaying. Extremely satisfied, we decided to move on and come back to the same spot later in the evening.

About Lesser Florican & Their Display During The Breeding Season:
Lesser Florican is endemic to the Indian Subcontinent, where it is found in tall grasslands and is best known for the leaping breeding displays made by the males during the monsoon season. These Bustards are found mainly in north-western and central India during the summer, but are found more widely distributed across India in winter. The species is ***highly endangered*** *and has been extirpated in some parts of its range such as* **Pakistan**. *It is threatened both by hunting and habitat degradation.*

During the breeding season, males leap suddenly from the grass with a peculiar croaking or knocking call, flutter their wings and fall back with slightly open wings. At the apogee of the leap the neck is arched backwards and the legs folded as if in a sitting posture. These jumps are repeated after intervals of about three or more minutes. The displays are made mainly in the early mornings and late evenings, but during other parts of the day in cloudy weather.

We got into our cars again and began moving slowly in convoy. Then Humayun saw a bird fly across and stopped the car. The bird went and perched in a bush nearby. It looked slightly larger than a Prinia and wagged its tail up and down. As we walked closer to the bird, we were all excited to find the Common Babbler, which is not so commonly found in the city. While we were busy shooting the bird, a few more joined the group and we realized there was an entire flock there. We had seen the Common Babbler in Rollapadu earlier, but not in so many numbers. We high-fived each other on our finding.

Common Babbler (Photo: Anita Negi)

Common Stonechat
(Photo: Lawrence Mathappan)

Extremely motivated, we decided to park our cars and take a small walk ahead to catch the other birds as it was still only around 8:30AM. There were Stonechats sitting on almost every alternate bush.

As we were walking, a flock of some 25 birds took off from right next to us; on closer observation we realized that it was a flock of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, who had been quietly sun-bathing, unaware of our presence. They camouflaged so well with the orange stones of Rollapadu that it was almost impossible to see them.

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (Photo: Humayun Taher)

By now, our day was already made. I personally started ignoring the presence of Drongos, Indian Robins, Paddyfield Pipits & Bushchats around after the fantabulous start of the day. The expectations were high now!

We decided to get back to the Florican to check if it had come out in the open. Suddenly Sudhir put his head out of the car, pointed at a dry tree and shouted “Raptor!” We stared out of the window to find a Red-necked Falcon perched on top of a dry tree, giving a magnificent view. But as we pulled out our cameras, the bird took off and disappeared. But it was a lovely sighting on a totally dry tree with no foliage to obstruct the view of the near-threatened bird.

Red-necked Falcon
(Photo: Gowthama Poludasu)

The sun had started to get hotter by now, and the birds had started to take shelter after the busy morning schedule. Even the Laughing Doves started to act 'pricey'. Humayun suggested we mount the watch tower to check for the Harriers and the Bustard (Just in case we got lucky!).

We all lined up and took turns to go to the top of the watchtower in batches of four. The Harriers had not arrived, as it was still a little early for the winter migrants. The Great Indian Bustard was not to be seen anywhere.

As we looked at the grassland from the top we realized that grassland had transformed completely from our earlier visits. It was not as lush and thick as before for the Bustard to nest or hide. All we could see was the Blackbuck. The disturbing fact is that about 100 Bustards were estimated in Rollapadu grasslands in 1985, which declined to 37 by 2005, and now to less than five - all of which are said to be females, leaving no possibility of numbers increasing in the future. What could be the reason for such drastic fall of these critically endangered birds? A number of reasons have contributed to such steep decline, according to experts in the field & conservationists.

Great Indian Bustard & Reasons For Its Declining Numbers:

The Great Indian Bustard is listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act.

An increase in the blackbuck population at the sanctuary has been postulated as one of the reasons for the fall in numbers of the bustard and the florican there. Their feeding on the grasses has in turn led to a fall in the numbers of grasshoppers and locusts that constitute an important source of food for the two bird species (Great Indian Bustard & Lesser Florican), besides also reducing the nesting area available to these ground-nesting birds.

A major issue has been lack of enough habitats for the birds. The Bustards depend on dry grasslands and cannot survive in areas with any other vegetation. Over the years, with the linking of Telugu Ganga Canal with Alganur Tank (a tank 2 km away from Rollapadu Sanctuary), there has been an increase in availability of water and the ecosystem has changed from dry grasslands to greener pastures. Even the farming practice has changed from dry land agriculture to water-intensive crops. With this change, the birds have gradually declined in population.

Disappointed with our view from the watch tower we took a break to decide our plan of action for afternoon birding. I suggested that we go to Alganur Tank, hardly any distance from Rollapadu Sanctuary, since over the last few years we had seen some good migratory birds in the tank, including the Pallas' Gull, Caspian Terns, Black- & Brown-headed Gulls, Flamingos and Bar-headed Goose, to name a few. However, not expecting much (as there was still time for the migrants to arrive) we moved on to Alganur Tank.

On reaching the tank, we were welcomed by the Red Avadavats, Bay-backed & Brown Shrikes. The tank was full of water and we could see good numbers of water birds to our surprise. As we reached closer we saw a Pied Kingfisher feasting on a freshly-caught meal, a huge flock of breeding River Terns, and several juveniles hovering in the sky or calmly settled by the lakeside. There were some Whiskered Terns as well in the flock. Common Sandpipers & Painted Storks were taking a stroll by the lakeside. Humayun took a good look with his binoculars and pointed at a solitary Greenshank in the middle of the lake.

Pied Kingfisher (Photo: Anita Negi)

Promising to come back at this place again for winter birding, we returned to get ourselves some lunch. On the way back we spotted a Rock Eagle Owl sitting right in front of us on the rocks. We looked at each other at the same time (The Owl & Us). It posed for us for a little while and then flew away into the forest. The excitement was back and all of us were charged again.

Rock Eagle Owl (Photo: Anita Negi)

We halted at the small town of Nandikotkur, around half an hour from Rollapadu, for lunch at around 2:00PM and feasted on some really tasty dishes. Or maybe we were just too hungry! We were also extremely dehydrated by then. Gokul, who hails from Kurnool, made us taste the local drink of Kurnool - *Nannari* - which is supposed to be a body coolant. Having eaten, and hydrated ourselves with the butter milk & the *Nannari*, we decided to go back to the sanctuary, to a small pool of water where the Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse and other birds usually come to drink water in the afternoon. As planned we were there by 3:30PM. A solitary Green Sandpiper was feeding itself along with the Little Grebes, while the Sandgrouse and the Eurasian Collared Doves flew down to drink water from the pool.

Eurasian Collared Dove (Photo: Humayun Taher)

Humayun and Lawrence Uncle decided to sit near the pool for some time watching the birds, while the rest of us zealously went around the sanctuary in search of more birds. Since it was too hot, we could only spot Zitting Cisticolas, Ashy-crowned Sparrow Larks, House Swifts & the flocks of Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse all around. Quite tired, by around 4:30PM we got back to the Florican, which had started its display again. We sat at a little distance, watching it display for an hour. What a sight it was!

The trip to Rollapadu was supposed to be a two-day trip, but Sudhir & I had to return on Saturday evening itself as we had to travel on work the next day. So, after watching the Lesser Florican display, we wished the other birders in the group good luck for the next day and departed.

Indian Courser (Photo: Humayun Taher)

Montagu's Harrier (Photo: Humayun Taher)

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Editors' Note:

Our members made a field trip to Ananthagiri Hills on 15th November 2015. We present below a trip report from two different perspectives.

AN ADVENTURE AMONG NEW FEATHERED FRIENDS

Trip Report – Ananthagiri Hills, 15th November 2015

Text and photos: Ritish (Grade-11)

Coppersmith Barbet

It was my first trip to Ananthagiri. I was very much excited when I heard about the field trip. Gokul Bhayya had mentioned that Ananthagiri was a good place to get sunrise and landscape photos, so we decided to reach the destination before the sunrise. We started our journey at 3:30AM from Chikkadpally. We quickly completed our light breakfast at Krupa (Dosa Point) and headed towards Ananthagiri. On our way Sathvik had spotted a Nightjar, so we stopped and tried to find it again, but we couldn't. We eventually reached Ananthagiri around 5:00AM. When I got down from the car it was freezing cold, and I was shivering very badly. The 4 of us picked up our gear and starting walking into the forest. Two of us had headlights. I was scared so I closed my eyes and held Sathvik's hand as I walked. There were spider-webs all around us, and we heard lots of insect sounds.

Since Gokul Bhayya had already visited the place, he said he would lead us. But after following him for an hour, we still could not find the path to the spot we were looking for. Gokul Bhayya could not find the route in the dark, and the lights were of little help. We eventually realized that we were lost, gave up and rested for a short time.

Sunrise had taken place and we were sad that we missed our sunrise shots. As soon as it became light, we saw 2 Nightjars flying over our heads, followed immediately by a Flameback Woodpecker which came and started knocking on a tree bark right in front of us. That moment was a feast to my eyes.

We were happy that it was a good start. We finally found our way to our spot, but since the sun was already up we could not get the photos we were looking for. However, in that landscape we spotted a Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, and started our birding from there.

As we proceeded, we spotted Rosy Starlings and White-bellied Drongos; we also saw an Oriental White-eye, which was my first sighting and we all thought we heard a call of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. We started looking around and it was actually a White-browed Fantail mimicking the Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. This was a first sighting too, and I was excited and impressed by its mimicking.

Moving towards the temple, we spotted the Strawberry Finch (Red Avadavat) and some Bee-eaters. We tried to click them but couldn't get any shots. Then we decided to go back to the starting point, as the BSAP members would have already arrived. On our way back we spotted Eurasian Collared Dove, White-naped Woodpecker, Small Minivet and Coppersmith Barbet. At the steps we heard call of a Rufous Treepie and saw it too.

We were sitting down at our car, having some refreshments, when we spotted White-browed Wagtail and Common Myna. After the refreshments we went on to the other side. We stopped at a big tree where we felt that there was lot of action. We saw Thick-billed Flowerpecker, Jerdon's Leafbird, Orange-headed Thrush, Asian Koel and Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker.

We kept on moving and all of a sudden we saw couple of Hornbills and tried to get some clicks, but could not. We had again taken a different route and saw Flameback Woodpeckers flying around us along with Asian Paradise-flycatcher. Later we decided to get back to our car, and met the rest of the members. I had one of my best experiences in my life on this trip. While walking through the forest I felt like I was safe in the hands of Mother Nature.

White-browed Wagtail

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WHEN THE SAVANNAHS CALL

Trip Report – Ananthagiri Hills, 15th November 2015

Amritha Lawrence

Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar

Early mornings on Sundays usually everyone wants to just stay in their beds, nursing their tiresome week and trying to just relax, but for me the joy of a Sunday would be getting lost in a vast stretch of savannahs right across the hills like a free and happy wolf that has nothing to fear. Such is the exhilarating feeling I get when I go to Ananthagiri hills on a misty Sunday morning.

Getting up at the break of dawn and preparing yourself for an amazing day out in the grasslands is refreshing, so like every other birding trip, this one started the same way. We got up at around 4:30AM and got ready to leave to the meeting point, stopping along the way to pick up a few birder friends. After about half an hour we came to the meeting point, where a few enthusiastic birders were already there, and waited for about half an hour more to meet and greet old birders and welcome new juveniles into our flock.

We set out to our destination in a big convoy, stopping at a 'tea point' for some coffee / tea to kick-start our day. After a few impromptu halts en route, we finally reached Ananthagiri Hills around 7:00AM. We split up into smaller groups, so that all the newbies would have some experienced birders to guide them. I, being an explorer, wanted to see a new place so, our group decided to trek up a small hill where we could see a few Rufous Treepies and woodpeckers flying around. That trek did make it clear that ropes and trekking shoes are a must for the next birding trip - you never know when you have to start climbing!

Black-rumped Flameback (Photo: Amritha Lawrence)

We struggled to the top of the hill, taking the help of several tree roots and branches, and felt like we were at the top of the world. Up top, we found a few flycatchers, a thrush, and the treepies and woodpeckers. Realizing that we couldn't go forward, we decided to head back down. But going back down can be quite a challenge, so the solution? - to slide down. That was fun!

Then we got back together with the others to head into the vast grasslands, to try and spot some more birds and, if possible, a few raptors. While crossing the patch of eucalyptus trees, we spotted a handful of Rose-ringed Parakeets and one Nightjar that was snuggled up nicely at a corner of the branch, trying to keep out of the limelight.

Tawny-bellied Babbler (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

Moving forward, we spotted the master of disguise - the Indian Chameleon - making its way up a eucalyptus tree.

Indian Chameleon (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

Reaching the grasslands, we scattered to see if we could find anything else, but it was already close to afternoon. People were trying to cool themselves under the heat of the winter's sun, so we decided to head back and find a place to relax and have our lunch. In about half an hour, we reached a farm-house belonging to one of our members, and sat around having lunch. A few members of the group were just hanging around the house, looking around, having a go at the boxing bag, relaxing in the hammock or just dipping their feet in the water and cooling off.

Heading back to our cars, we decided to return to the farm-house soon, to resume the birding again. We then bid each other farewell until the next trip, and headed back home, happy at having experienced the winds of the savannah and the freedom under the blue sky across the hills. Ananthagiri Hills will always make me feel at home within its grasslands.

Orange-headed Thrush (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

Sahana, one of the young brigade, engrossed in Salim Ali's *Book of Indian Birds* (Photo: Dr Samuel Sukumar)

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Bird of the Month

Text and photo: Umesh Mani

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)

Short-eared Owl (Chennai, 21-03-2015)

Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Asio*
Species: *A. flammeus*
Size: 37-39 cm

Description & distribution: The Short-eared Owl is a typical member of the genus Asio, which are known as the eared owls. The name stems from the tufts of feathers that resemble mammalian ears; these 'ear' tufts may, however, not always be visible. The species name flammeus comes from the Latin word meaning "flaming", or "the colour of fire".

The Short-eared Owl has distinctive large, yellow eyes highlighted by encircling black rings and surrounding white facial disks, which give the appearance of a bird wearing a mask. A big head with a short but strong black hooked bill and a short neck gives it a heavy look. The plumage is tawny to brown, mottled, and the wings and tail are barred. The breast is deeply streaked. Females are slightly larger than males. Besides a few other features best seen in flight, the yellow irises serve to distinguish it from the Long-eared Owl, with whom it overlaps much of its range. Its broad wings and irregular wingbeats give it a floppy flight that resembles that of a bat or moth.

The Short-eared Owl has one of the widest distributions among all birds, being found on all continents except Australia and Antarctica. Ten sub-species are recognised, with *A. f. flammeus*, the nominate, being found in North America, Europe, and the northern parts of Africa and Asia. It is a local migrant, wintering in the southern parts of its range.

Habitat & behaviour: The Short-eared Owl is usually seen in small groups, numbering 3-4 or less. Though it huts mainly at night, it is also known to be diurnal and crepuscular. Hunting is said to coincide more with the high-activity period of its main prey, voles and rodents. It flies low over the ground, until it swoops feet-first on its prey. Besides rodents, it may pick up other small mammals like mice, shrews, squirrels, moles and bats. Near coasts and adjacent wetlands, they are known to prey on smaller birds like terns and smaller gulls, whereas inland, they may pick up larks, pipits, starlings or flycatchers; they may also add insects like beetles, grasshoppers, caterpillars etc. In North America, it has shown a frequent tendency to compete aggressively with the Northern Harrier, with whom it shares

habitat and prey, and these species are known to harry each other.

Its call is scratchy and bark-like; the usual sounds are a grating *waowk, waowk* or a *toot, toot, toot*. While breeding, it may also emit a loud *eee-yerp*. It is usually silent on the wintering grounds.

Nesting: The Short-eared Owl breeds from March to June; otherwise seen in ones and twos, during breeding season they may gather in flocks. The males put on a spectacular courtship display, swooping over the nest while flapping its wings. It nests on the ground in prairie, tundra, savanna or meadow grasslands. The nest is usually a depression on the ground, lined with weeds, grass or feathers, and concealed by bushes or other low vegetation. The usual clutch consists of 4-7 white eggs, though this may go up to 12 at times when food is abundant. There is only one brood per year. Incubation is usually done by the females. The Short-eared Owl is known to use a broken-wing display to lure predators away from its nest.

Local name: The Short-eared Owl is known as *'pucha munga'* in Malayalam, '*ravayido dhuvad'* in Gujarati and *'pecha'* in Oriya.

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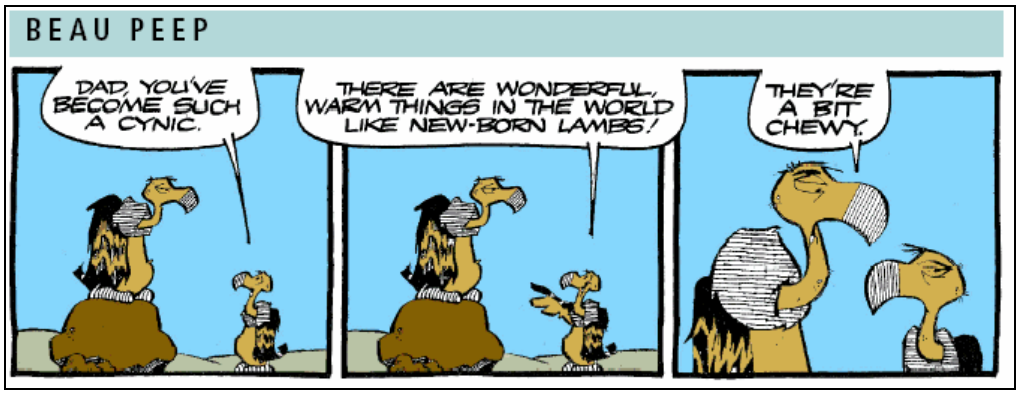
Bird Humour


BEAU PEEP
DAD, YOU'VE BECOME SUCH A CYNIC.
THERE ARE WONDERFUL, WARM THINGS IN THE WORLD LIKE NEW-BORN LAMBS!
THEY'RE A BIT CHEWY.

(From Times of India, 02-10-2012)

For Private Circulation Only
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For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/bsap_online. **Website:** www.bsap.in. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*